

A brief history of Shelby Springs

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A BRIEF HISTORY
OF
SHELBY SPRINGS

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A Brief History of Shelby Springs

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Shelby Springs has a history, which reaches back four hundred years. In 1540, when De Sota came through Alabama, he visited Cosa, an important Creek Indian Town in Talladega County, which is not much over ten miles from Shelby Springs. De Sota could easily have come here and in all probability he did, because the springs were popular with the Indians. The Indians had great faith in the healing qualities of the springs, and our early white settlers said it was with great reluctance that the Indians left them behind for the white man. Tristan de Lunas visited Cosa in 1560 and De Pardo visited it in 1566. They too surely drank from the waters of Shelby Springs.

During the Creek Indian war of 1813-14 General Andrew Jackson visited Cosa, and also the site of Fort Williams, which is on the east bank of the Coosa River at an important Indian ford, leading from Talladega to Shelby County. It is quite likely that Jackson visited Shelby Springs and certainly his men did. A part of them, on their way from Talladega County to Tennessee, traveled westward through Columbiana to the region around Calera, and went north to the Cahaba Valley to an Indian trail and followed it into Tennessee. Jackson's soldiers returned after the war and settled Shelby County.

Shelby County was one of the original counties. It was established by the Legislature of Alabama on February 7, 1818. By 1820 there were 2,492 people in the county. But until after 1840 the people were too busy building houses and barns, and clearing fields to go to a watering place. After a while, however, prosperity came over the land and Shelby Springs became famous. Long before rail roads were built, people drove for miles in carriages to come here. A stage coach was operated on a regular schedule from Montevallo by way of Shelby Springs to Talladega. The Alabama and Tennessee River Rail Road was chartered in 1848. It began at Selma and reached Shelby Springs in 1853. From that time on Shelby Springs was a summer mecca for the wealthy planters of the Black Belt of Alabama.

federate hospital at Shelby Springs. The hospital occupied the old hotel building and cabins. The chief Surgeon was Dr. D. Warren Brickell. His assistants were a Dr. Bradbury, who later located in New Orleans, Dr. John P. Furness, who died long after the war, in Selma, Alabama, and a Dr. Jones, who lived in Meridian, Mississippi, after the war, etc."

'Captain Pierce thinks that the hospital was under the management of the Catholic Sisters. He says he recalls Father LeRay as a Priest stationed there.'

'The place was considered very healthy, and the hospital had many inmates from time to time.'

Records at the National Archives, Washington, D. C., do not indicate that the hospital was connected with the Catholic Church, but Captain Pierce surely could not have been mistaken about a matter so obvious. Doubtless the Catholic Church did have some connection with the hospital at some time during its existence. The nurses there possibly were the "Sisters of Charity."

Father LeRay was made General Chaplin of the Confederate Armies, and after the war became Archbishop of New Orleans.

From the National Archives, Washington, D. C., we also learn that "On March 16, 1864, Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk ordered Surgeon Benjamin H. Thomas to proceed to Shelby Springs and take charge of the hospital there. He was to take with him all hospital property in his possession, extend the capacity of the Shelby Springs Hospital to three hundred and fifty beds and make it a complete soldiers home." It was known as a 'Soldiers Home' until March 31, 1864, when Preston B. Scott, Medical Director of Alabama, ordered that it should be designated as 'General Hospital, Shelby Springs.' This latter designation, which meant 'a home for invalid and disabled soldiers,' was continued until the close of the war.'

'Surgeon Thomas continued in charge of the hospital until November 22, 1864, when he was succeeded by Surgeon D. Warren Brickell, who remained in charge

Sulphur and chalybeate springs of cold water slake the thirst, and give strength and vigor to the enfeebled frame, while the cool, refreshing breezes sport amid the branches of the old oak trees. The goodness of God is manifest in the rich provision he has made for the health and happiness of his creatures....."

In March, 1871, the Montgomery Advertiser contained the following article: "SHELBY SPRINGS.-----This famous Summer resort, distinguished not only in Alabama, but all over the South, will be opened for the reception of guests on the 1st day of June. It will be under the personal supervision of Mr. Wimberly, who is known far and wide as a successful caterer and manager. No watering place in the South is more beautiful or attractive than Shelby Springs. All kinds of mineral water, the shadiest groves, and the healthiest climate in all the land.---Only three hours travel from Montgomery to Shelby Springs. Think of it. It is the very place for our people to visit this Summer."

We can see from these letters and newspaper clippings that Shelby Springs was fast coming again into her own. Even the conditions in the South in the post war years, did not prevent Shelby Springs from again becoming a popular watering place. Rail roads were being constructed throughout Alabama, which encouraged travel, and people could now come to the springs from long distances, even from other states.

In October, 1869, the Selma, Rome, and Dalton Rail Road had daily one mail train and one freight train going toward Rome, and the same number going toward Selma. And it claimed the following distinction: "This line offers the best facilities for the transportation of both freight and passengers of any line connecting the East and West, south of the Ohio River." In February, 1871, this road had "Fine sleeping coaches running through from Selma to Cleveland, Tennessee."

The 10th Alabama Regiment, a part of the Army of Northern Virginia, held its first reunion here on July 27, 1871. The Selma, Rome and Dalton Rail Road ran a special train. This was the first time many of the

In 1887 the springs properties were renovated and modernized. From the pen of an editorial correspondent of the Montgomery Advertiser, we are given an excellent picture of the springs. His description is as follows: "These once famous, but long neglected springs have fallen at last into skillful, enterprising and experienced hands. Col. J. M. Dedman, so long the popular host of the St. James Hotel, in Selma, has energetically set out to make his investment pay. His wide acquaintance gives him a happy start, and he realizes that above all other businesses a watering place must observe the maxim, "spend money to make money." A pleasant half hour was spent in inspecting these springs and the improvements made. This is what was seen:

The old hotel has been furnished up until hardly its best friend would know it. Additions have been added by which the sleeping apartments are increased from ten to twenty-two. The elegant dining room is entirely new, being an apartment 67 x 30 feet, with a floor laid especially to dance on. Even the kitchen was inspected and all its appointments pronounced modern and first class. Off on the east and south of the hotel is a row of cottages, and dotting the park here and there are several more, making sixteen in all and six of them brand new. The new ones especially are tasteful and comfortable cottages and present quite a pretty appearance.

All the buildings are lighted with gas manufactured on the spot, and lamps are placed at proper intervals through the grounds. The grounds themselves are graded nicely now, and new walks and avenues are being made between the several points of interest. Of course the inevitable ten-pin alley is here, but something that other watering places do not provide is a free billiard room and table for the guests' amusement, without money and without price.

Now as to the water. This is of three kinds--sulphur, iron, and magnesia. The springs of all three are close at hand; a nice pavillion adjoins these three sulphur springs. Pipes from these three sulphur

Shelby in Secretary's Office

springs lead to the new bath house close by, where hot and cold baths are provided. It is also pumped into a tank, which puts it in unlimited quantities all over the hotel.

Shelby Springs is a lovely place and is being made more so by tasteful improvements. It has long been the favorite resort of Selma's people, and has been recently growing in popularity with Montgomerians. If it was a pleasant place in the past it is a paradise now. As the nearest place to Montgomery where cool nights, mountain air and mineral waters combine, her people will join Selma in making it their favorite stopping place. Numerous applications for rooms have already been received from Montgomery people, etc."

For the season of 1889 the management of the springs offered "hot or cold sulphur baths at any hour of the day at a nominal cost." For amusement there was offered: "a billiard room, a bowling alley, lawn tennis and many other popular games." The hotel was said to be first class in every particular, with a splendid ball room. Music was furnished by an excellent string band.

By 1905 visitors were received all through the year. Driving or automobile parties were offered excellent terms with accommodations for their stock and vehicles. In addition to the amusements offered in 1889, croquet and golf were offered. "An expert gardner was employed throughout the season to grow in rotation all sorts of garden delicacies for the table." The springs were popular at this time and had guests from all over Central Alabama and some from Florida and Mississippi. Many notable persons were its guests. Some of them were: U. S. Senator E. W. Pettus, Honorable Joseph F. Johnston, Birmingham, Dr. W. C. Hill, Montgomery, Honorable W. W. Screws, Montgomery, Honorable Borden Burr, Talladega, Dr. Lamar Law, Montgomery, Dr. B. B. Simms, Talladega, and many others.

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